LANGUAGE MASTERY

ITS RELATION TO MISSIONS

BY

REV. THOMAS F. CUMMINGS, D. D.

PROFESSOR OF PHONETICS AND LANGUAGE STUDY IN THE BIBLE TEACHERS TRAINING SCHOOL, NEW YORK

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By Dr. Thomas F. Cummings, Professor of Phonetics and Language Study in the Bible Teachers Training School

"ON THIS most vital matter of proficiency in the language the evidence seems conclusive: * * * that a considerable number of missionaries never obtain a full mastery of the pronunciation and idiom of the native languages; * * * that faulty speech injures most seriously the authority and effectiveness of public address; and that the home boards have in too many instances been unaware of the true state of matters, or have been unable to provide an adequate remedy." So runs the report of the Edinburgh Conference.[1]

Whatever this "considerable number" is, whether the 88 per cent lacking in proficiency, as estimated by one society,[2] or the 43 per cent that after six years fail to attain efficiency, as estimated by the New York Conference,[3] it is beyond question that the condition is a reproach to the cause represented, and to the scholarship, or lack of it, that is thereby manifested.

When one inquires into causes for failure, it is explained as owing to "lack of time," or to "the poor native teachers;" and it is said in the Report: "The old days of the easy-going irresponsible munshi (teacher) must end." Since mission work, however, is a life work, there must be some other explanation than "lack of time." There remains, therefore, that of the teacher. Before we condemn him, however, should we not inquire as to whether he is really to blame? In order to shift the inquiry to a wider field, let us ask: Have the American, Canadian, and British educational institutions, of high or low degree, given their pupils who took French and German, to say nothing of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, any adequate knowledge of these two modern languages, such as would fit them to relate and explain, say, the incident of the woman at the well, or the prodigal son, to a French or German class? Unquestionably, no; they have not.

It is notorious that our Anglo-Saxon language teaching,

[1]Commission V, p. 61. [2]Ibid., p. 60. [3]Report 1909, p. 24.

judged by the requirements of the the mission field, the ability to speak the language intelligently, has been a failure. A Yale graduate, as quoted by Upton Sinclair in the Independent of June 19, 1902, says that as a result of eleven years of Latin, seven years of German, and four years of French, "I was not able to read even easy Latin, German, or French. The years given to the study of these languages was wasted —and my health besides."

Such being the case, and the experience of most of us would obviate any further need of proof, is it not apparent that the native teacher is not really to blame, but rather that the method that he in common with his Anglo-Saxon colleague is prone to follow lies at the root of the evil. This method, which we may as well call the scholastic, has arisen from the way in which we have learned to read our own language in the schools, as children. When we are asked to teach anyone, we instinctively turn to the way that we were taught—or think we were—and follow the same routine.

But there is a deeper reason for the failure than this, and that is the ideal that we have before us in language teaching; for, as the Committee of Twelve appointed by the Modern Language Association puts it: "Ability to speak is a secondary consideration as compared with the ability to read intelligently." Our American ideal is to be able to read the book with ease and profit. Though even to this, our whole method being false, we but seldom attain.

But deeper still, and fundamental to our whole false and ineffective scheme of language study, lies our partially true definition of language as a "mode of communicating thought." It is all that, but it is the communication of thought by audible speech which constitutes language. The syllogism that has turned the language teaching of home and foreign fields all topsy-turvy is:

A. All students ought to get the language of the people.
B. The assigned text-books contain the language of the people.
C. Therefore all students must learn the text-books, and they will have the language of the people.

If B were true, then C would be true, but since B is false, for no book ever contained audible speech, C is as false in theory as it is vicious in practice and ineffective in result. Language is sound, not vision. It is not an artifice of man in

cold type, but a living, throbbing voice. Not a dead man-made ghost, but the Divine in man revealing itself to the spirit of its fellow man in an instrument of wondrous beauty and flexibility. The very soul of speech is the intonation, but on the printed page is no intonation, no rhythm, no facial play, not so much as even a cubist caricature of speech.

If we ought in our teaching to begin with the concrete rather than the abstract, and who will deny it, why do we begin with printed matter, and then to that add another abstraction, the "grammar" of the language? Greek and Latin are dead, and so the scalpel of the grammar in the dissecting room of the classicist is a fitting instrument to dismember the ancient cadavers, and the "tables" a fitting place to pile up the "parts" in their dead oneness. And when we were told to take those dead members and organize them into life, were we successful? Can man raise the dead? So now, when we go to the foreign field, and cannot find a native teacher able to dissect, cut, and pile, according to our former training, we say: "This man cannot teach us. He does not know his own language." And out of our ignorance we ask, again and again, Why is this so? How do you explain that? little realizing that the "why" of language is frequently impossible of explanation. When the pupil can "parse" and explain the "had" of the sentence, "You had better go," he may insist on a full explanation of all idioms.

Now, what is the proposed remedy? Schools. Schools at home, say some. Schools on the field, say others. No doubt schools anywhere under competent European supervision would be an improvement, but it is not an improvement that is needed, but a cure. A more drastic remedy than "schools" is demanded. There must be a revolution in method. What this might mean to the mission fields is shown by one sentence from a statement made by a former language examiner of the United Presbyterian Mission in the Panjab, India: "I unhesitatingly affirm that those who use the Phonetic Inductive Method begin effective work two years sooner than we who used the old method"—and our results were attained with native teachers. At the end of the first year the pupils are required among other things to be able to give offhand, with explanation and application, any parable or miracle in the Gospel of Luke or John; and this means that they are ready to begin work where that language is used. But they

must have an easy language, says the objector. By no means. There is possibly no country in Asia that has a more difficult set of sounds than the Urdu, unless it be Panjabi. However, it is worthy of notice that all children begin to speak their respective languages at about the same age, and at about the same period acquire fluency in them, though they be of foreign parentage. Hence it seems fair to conclude that, inherently, there is no special difficulty in mastering any given language. Man is really too lazy to permit the survival of an extraordinarily difficult speech.

Why must there be a revolution in method? Because both the material and the manner of assimilating this material are faulty. The material of language is not primers and readers, dictionaries and grammar; the material of language is sounds, and these sounds whether few or many, easy or difficult, must be apprehended by the ear before the language can be "learned." It may not be amiss here to define the term learn. To learn a language is so to master its sounds, constructions, and vocabulary, as to be able to set forth one's ideas readily, accurately, and fluently. If elegance and eloquence can be added, well, but these three are requisite to the Gospel herald, with the further requirement that he be able to understand what he himself hears.

Now the content of language sounds may be divided into letters, words, and sentences, and the difficulties of learning a language are three: First, those of pronunciation as found in the letter, the word, and the sentence; second, those of construction, whether regular or not; third, those of vocabulary, whether general or technical.

Language itself may be defined as "the habitual use of certain sounds, or combinations of sounds, to represent certain definite ideas," and the learning of any particular new language is the acquiring of a new habit of utterance. If language is sound it ought to be apprehended by the organ which is appropriate to sound, the ear. The *reductio ad absurdum* is, however, to be seen in the publication, in "New York point," of raised type books for teaching French to the hearing blind, through their fingers! It only remains for taste and smell to be made the medium of training in language.

But as all peoples have for the formation of their language sounds the same vocal organs, have they not also the same fundamental ideas to be expressed? An analysis of

a vocabulary drawn from actual life[1] reveals the fact that out of a total vocabulary of 2,001 words, aggregating 24,000 word occurrences, 2 per cent of the whole vocabulary, or 43 words, furnished one-half of the 24,000 words, and 542 words, or 27 per cent, gave seven-eighths of the total. An examination of a general vocabulary drawn from the Buffalo Times,[2] shows about 44,000 word occurrences, and a total vocabulary of 6,002 words. Of these 238 words, or less than 4 per cent, give 65 per cent of the whole occurrences. Another list,[3] largely Biblical and religious, of 100,000 word occurrences, shows that 353 words, presumably 3 per cent of the whole, give 76,000 word occurrences, or more than three-quarters of the total. This means that a very small vocabulary, of considerably less than 1,000 words, might be chosen as the basis of an excellent working vocabulary. We may further infer that the vocabulary of the ordinary language book is extremely ill chosen.

A study of the Gospel of John shows that it has about 1,000 words, of which 50 per cent are nouns, but that in a given chapter, as the fourth, only a fourth of the words are nouns; and in Knowles' list the most used words are in order, prepositions, verbs, articles, pronouns, conjunctions, and adverbs, before nouns, while only adjectives occur less frequently. Yet are not the noun and the adjective in the ordinary language book magnified far beyond the value given to these more frequently occurring parts of speech?

It appears, too, from these and other word lists that the preposition is one of the most important parts of speech in every language. What method gives the preposition its due honor? No, the whole comparative value of the parts of speech needs revision, for of the first 100 words in one list, the sixty-seventh was the first noun in one, and the forty-seventh in the other, while, respectively, only eight and eleven nouns all told were found in these two lists, up to their first hundred words. The fact that these proportions in English are relatively true for Greek, Arabic, and Hindustani, leads one to the conclusion that it is a part of the intellectual furnishment of the race to follow these lines in its thinking. If so, it should be easily possible to work out an ideal

[1]Sage Foundation, E 126.

[2]Eldridge's List, 5. [3]Knowles' List (Eldridge's 6).

vocabulary, of those essential idea words that will be found in every language; and from these should be possible such a ground-plan of language as would fit every tongue. Whether this be true or not, it may be taken as sure that the present overcrowded, ill-chosen vocabularies, with their thousands of words for the first year's work, are unreasonable and impossible.

But this is not the worst feature of scholastic language methods. Owing to the misapprehension that regards language as printed matter, it has been put as a burden on visual and mental powers that were never intended by nature to carry it, and the result has been and always must be, failure. Better results would come from teaching botany with artificial flowers, than language from present eye methods.

Language is a habit of uttering sounds. Now, how do we utter sounds? Is it by remembering them, one by one, or do they utter themselves, at the proper time and occasion? Undoubtedly the latter. A habit is like a series of bricks standing on end. Knock one down and in succession, one after the other, down they all go. We start to repeat the words of a familiar song, but cannot recall it. We begin to sing it, the habit reasserts itself, and line after line to the end it sings itself. Was it memory? Not our intellectual memory, but the motor memory, the muscular memory, the automatic memory, whatever you are pleased to call it. This is the faculty that takes care of our language. It is on this that we must depend. We must cultivate this motor memory and train it to utter a new set of sounds, from new impulses, till a new habit is formed.

In studies regarding the formation of habit, it has been determined that an act oft repeated at last reaches a point where it crystallizes into a habit, having become automatic. It has, too, been determined that unless this repetition is carried to the point where it does crystallize, the effort is dissipated and so wasted. This is why so much of our language labor has gone for naught. We stopped short of automaticity and our work, that in a little while would have become a habit, was without result.

But repetition or practice, to attain this automatic perfection, must be carried on correctly, else it will fix an imperfect action and so beget a bad habit. To practice properly involves a right beginning or such repetition as is always mov-

ing toward the better. Take it in the matter of pronunciation. It is imperative that practice in pronunciation should from the start be as nearly perfect as possible, and that it should day by day improve. This can only be as the pupil has a chance to hear a good speaker, be he native or fellow countryman, and learns to hear him. It will only be as the pupil hears his own errors and the true pronunciation contrasted that his progress will be steady and rapid. It will only be when the pupil's own ear becomes his best guide that he can hope to attain success. Some expect to make these sounds properly although they have never heard them. They think they hear them, but they hear only what they were accustomed to hear in English. They must listen till they can differentiate the sounds of the one language from the other, and then, and not till then, will they be in a position to begin to speak properly. Here a well-taught fellow countryman will be of greater assistance than a native teacher. Here phonetic training becomes an imperative necessity.

It is to be remembered—for it is one of the oversights of the scholastic method—that true normal pronunciation is not found only, or truly, in the individual word, but in the sentence. For example, we say that the definite article is the, and the indefinite a, but we never give them this sound in the sentence. So in all languages we must study pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, not in the word, where they do not exist, but in the sentence.

The mastery of construction, however, is the great test of any and every language method, and here is where the "habit formation" method, the Phonetic Inductive, leads all others. It has one rule, which, if observed, insures success. It is:

Write in English, on a slip of cardboard, the sentence to be learned. Let the teacher give its vernacular equivalent orally several times; and then, in groups of three or four syllables, group after group, let the pupil learn to repeat the whole sentence.

Let the pupil now repeat the sentence, alternately with the teacher, until he can give it at normal speed, five syllables per second.[1]

After such speed is attained, add another sentence, re-

[1]Four for Chinese and six for Japanese, but five for most languages.

peating it, after bringing to normal speed, alternately with the old material.

Maintain this speedy repetition for a couple of weeks, then lay the material aside for a week, when it should be reviewed, and if not readily produced it should be kept in hand a few days till it becomes automatic.

Nothing worth learning must be allowed to slip out of mind. *Perfect mental readiness, absolute grammatical accuracy, and normal lingual fluency* are the standard to which one must attain, if he is going to succeed, and the watch, as it ticks off the seconds, making no allowance, and showing no favors, is the best incentive to this attainment.

Every art and science has its fundamental formulae, its basic principles. He who would be a master must gain an instant and automatic command of these. For example, the fundamentals of arithmetic are the sum, difference, and product of the nine digits. He who is skilled in computation must know his multiplication tables so well that he need never stop to recollect how much 7 x 9 are, but automatically the answer comes to his mind, 63. Anything less is an annoyance and vexation.

Apply this principle to language mastery, as to any other art, and you have a ready standard to gauge your attainments. He who would be a master of the art of speaking any language must have an automatically ready, accurate, and fluent command of the pronunciation, construction, and vocabulary of that language. To get one's foreign phrases correctly after a second or third trial is about as satisfactory as a like readiness would be in making change for railroad tickets.

It has been determined in habit practice that one should not work for long periods, but rather have several such practice periods distributed over the day. It has also been determined that "it is intense effort that educates," and there is nothing more intense and interesting than trying to beat your own record in reciting slips. Variety of repetition is urged by some, and it can be secured if one will make slight changes in the sentences, after they have grown familiar, by giving a different person, number, or tense from that of the original.

The more than ten years' trial that this method has had in India, the success that its use there in the United Presbyterian Mission in the Panjab has had, the success that has

attended trials of the method in a half-dozen other countries, its thirty years' development, in its main features in Germany, the constitution of the human mind, and, above all, the colossal failure of the Anglo-Saxon world in Language Teaching unite in the demand, for the sake of humanity to the new missionary and of loyalty to the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, that the old method be cast out, and this new, scientific, effective method be adopted in its stead.

Schools are all right, but let them not be schools of a two years' course by the old scholastic method; but let them be schools that in one year, or less, will furnish the missionary for his work.

Since writing the above, I have received word from a former pupil, who was also a pupil in the Lucknow, India, school, a school formed as a result of the Edinburgh Conference, as to the method employed in their study of Urdu. After a month spent in phonetic training, he says: "We spent ourselves on grammar. It was the old method." Therefore I contend that it is not a question of *where* we shall study, *wasting* ourselves on grammar, but of *how* we shall *get* the language.

After ten years of trial in the United Presbyterian Mission in the Panjab, India, the Mission Language Committee in October, 1910, presented the following: "It is the judgment of your committee that the Cummings' system of language study is of the greatest importance in the acquiring of either vernacular" (Hindustani or Panjabi).

The Rev. W. B. Anderson, language examiner, estimates the increased output, due to this method, at 500 per cent. Speaking of the examinations he says: "I think the progress of the first year candidates who used this method was phenomenal. This was shown in facility of expression, correctness of pronunciation, knowledge of idiom, and ability to understand the native."

Another examiner, Miss Mary J. Campbell, says: "I know it is possible for one to be speaking fluently at the end of one year. Under the old system no one could speak either correctly or fluently in such time, but this system enables one at the end of a year to speak easily and with understanding. One does not need to be a good linguist to accomplish this much."

Another, Mrs. Alice McClure, says: "I unhesitatingly

affirm that those who follow the Phonetic Inductive Method begin effective work two years sooner than we who followed the old method."

The East Persian Mission has tentatively adopted this method after seeing its results in some pupils who had had four days of training in phonetics and method, a course of about thirty hours.

A two weeks' demonstration of the method in Korea resulted in the adaptation to the Korean of the Panjabi Manual. This manual was wrought out on the idea that all languages have fundamentally the same basic ideas.

Further demonstrations in China and Japan proved conclusively that a phonetic training is the solution of their pronunciation difficulties, and that, along with the oral, inductive method, will lead to a full and early mastery of these languages.

Rev. Fred Newton, of India, who examined a class taught one month in Hindustani, said that in pronunciation they were equal to the ordinary missionary after twelve months, and in conversational ability, with a small vocabulary, were about the equals of those of five or six months' standing.